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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 COLOMBO 001053

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TAGS: [PTER](#) [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [PREL](#) [KIRF](#) [CE](#) [LTTE](#)

SUBJECT: SRI LANKA: STALEMATE OVER STATUE IN TRINCOMALEE
CONTINUES

REF: A. COLOMBO 955

[B](#). COLOMBO 1039

Classified By: CDA:JENTWISTLE. REASON: 1.4 (B,D).

SUMMARY

[1](#)1. (SBU) Summary: During a June 8-10 visit to the eastern district of Trincomalee, poloff and POL FSN conducted a series of discussions with government officials, religious leaders, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and human rights activists. While somewhat muted and at times overshadowed by issues of tsunami relief distribution and the continued debate about the joint mechanism (septel), religious and ethnic tension remains high as the standoff over the controversial Buddha statue (Ref A) continues. The Tamil People's Organization, a front for the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), announced June 2 that it will give the Government until June 15 to remove the statue or face civil unrest. END SUMMARY.

TRAVEL TO TRINCOMALEE

[1](#)2. (SBU) Poloff and POL FSN conducted a series of meetings from June 8-10 in Trincomalee with government officials, religious leaders, NGOs, and human rights groups. Discussions touched on a wide variety of topics, including the current security situation and tensions arising from the placement of the Buddha statue on public grounds (Ref A); relief efforts for those displaced by the December 26 tsunami; the longstanding conflict between the Government of

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Sri Lanka (GSL) and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE); and the overall human rights and religious freedom situation in the district.

STANDOFF OVER STATUE

[1](#)3. (SBU) Religious and ethnic tension remains high in Trincomalee as the standoff over the controversial Buddha statue continues. The May 18 decision by a local judge ordering the removal of the statue, and the subsequent May 25 reaffirmation of the judge's order had not been implemented. Hopes for a resolution now fall on a new court case, initially scheduled to begin on June 13, but now postponed until August 3. Government Agent (GA) for Trincomalee Gamini Rodrigo told poloff that both parties involved, the Trishaw (three-wheeled taxi) drivers union, which is affiliated with the Sinhalese nationalist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), and the LTTE-aligned Tamil People's Organization (TPO), led by V. Vigneswaran, have agreed to abide by the Court's decision.

[1](#)4. (C) Most observers in Trincomalee see no actual problem with the presence of the statue, as religious statues representing a myriad of faiths, both large and small in size, are abundant in the multi-ethnic district. Rather, most Tamil sources seem to be offended by the manner in which the statue was erected-- surreptitiously and in the middle of the night. Many viewed its surprise appearance as a deliberate provocation by the JVP. Trincomalee Bar Association President K. Sivapalan indicated to poloff that the location chosen to erect this particular statue seemed odd for a religious symbol since a fish market, butcher shop, and liquor store are all in close proximity.

[1](#)5. (C) "Statue Politics," as many are calling this current standoff, show both sides jockeying for position as questions loom over the stalled Joint Mechanism and the continued erosion of the Cease Fire Agreement (CFA) (Ref B). Residents of Trincomalee are frustrated with the lack of progress on both fronts, and some observers suggest the statue's erection by the JVP is another way for the party to influence Government deliberations over the Joint Mechanism. Arthur Treiten of the Sri Lankan Monitoring Mission (SLMM) told poloff and POL FSN that any movement on the Joint Mechanism, which he sees as the real concern, would likely overshadow the statue issue.

(6) (C) The TPO and the pro-LTTE Tamil National Alliance (TNA) announced on June 2 plans for a large-scale strike for June 15 unless the statue, now surrounded by barbed wire and guarded by security forces, is removed. Rodrigo, Treiten, and others suggested to poloff that the strike could be further postponed depending on the outcome of the (now-postponed) June 13 court case and in deference to the ongoing "A Level" exams. However, in a June 10 meeting in Colombo, TNA Parliamentarians Gajendrakumar Ponnambalam and Suresh Premachandran, both representing Jaffna, told poloff that the strike will go on as scheduled with an exemption for students taking the "A level" exams. Both MPs suggested the strike could turn violent and also suggested that the fragile CFA could be undermined if the GSL fails to sign the Joint Mechanism. (Comment: Both MPs are well known to this Embassy for making dire predictions, most of which never materialized.)

17. (SBU) Despite the tense political situation in Trincomalee, the ground situation appears relatively peaceful--largely due to the strong security force presence throughout the district. Security forces were stationed, sometimes two or three to a block in the town itself, and in even greater concentration closer to the statue's location near the bus stand. Some Trincomalee contacts have suggested the placement of a Hindu statue alongside that of the Buddha as a remedy, but no word has been publicly made as to whether this would be acceptable to all parties.

Tsunami Aid

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18. (C) With all eyes in Trincomalee now focused on the statue, attention to other important issues is being diverted. Among such pressing matters is the rehabilitation of tsunami-affected internally displaced persons (IDPs), as well as IDPs from the conflict, some of whom have remained in camps for more than 15 years. Some NGO sources lamented that communication between the GSL and IDPs remains poor in the East. According to NGO sources, some tsunami-affected IDPs in certain areas have not received any aid for the past two months. Brita Helleland from the United Nations High Commission on Refugees (UNHCR) told poloff that the GSL decision to centralize relief efforts and the slowness of the customs system were huge obstacles in distributing aid. Helleland also relayed to poloff that prior to the GSL decision to centralize relief, NGOs, along with Trincomalee authorities, had created their own "Joint Mechanism" to distribute relief, which was subsequently stifled by the center. NGO representatives told poloff that the Buffer Zone requirement would be a stumbling block to rehabilitation efforts, and were puzzled by the discrepancy between buffer zone requirements in the North and East (200 meters), and those in the South and West (100 meters). Helleland also commented on the increased outward display of religious and ethnic identity--in the form of flags, statues, and other symbols--among the various communities in Trincomalee, a trend also noticed by POL FSN.

19. (C) Another aspect complicating the IDP equation is the potential conflict between tsunami-affected IDPs and conflict-affected IDPs, many of whom live side-by-side in the same camps. Discrepancies in aid and temporary shelter provisions could lead to conflict between the two groups and against the GSL, some sources speculated, as could frustration by conflict-affected IDPs over lack of progress in their situation since the CFA was signed in 2002. Helleland told poloff that in Trincomalee the GSL had begun to find land to give conflict-affected IDPs, but charged that the central Government in Colombo was delaying this initiative. Helleland offered little hope that these IDPs would be allowed back on their old land--now occupied by the LTTE--as most of it falls into the LTTE's High Security Zone.

110. (SBU) Poloff and POL FSN also met with Christian clergy and a Muslim organization to discuss matters of religious freedom. Both groups told poloff that they were free to practice their religion, although some Christians told poloff of parishioners being stopped by JVP members who asked how the Christians benefited financially from going to church.

COMMENT

11. (C) The situation in Trincomalee remains tense but quiet, largely due to the sizeable contingent of SLA personnel now stationed in the district. Given the simmering security situation in the traditionally volatile district, whether the Government can or will comply with TNA pressure to reduce that presence remains unclear. Unfortunately, just as it has in its protests against the joint mechanism, the Sinhalese nationalist JVP is using religion as a weapon in

its battle for the political limelight. While we do not necessarily agree with the TNA MPs' predictions of immediately impending doom, we do concur that increased civil unrest-whatever happens on June 15-seems increasingly likely. Our consular section chief is visiting Trincomalee today to stay in touch with the American Community there.

ENTWISTLE